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KEWDALE COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM*

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During 1977, Ms Kathleen Miller and Mr Adrian Haydock operated an innovation program for disadvantaged children at the Kewdale Development Centre. A high proportion of the children attending the centre were Aboriginal, and so the Aboriginal Education Branch was approached for assistance in designing a suitable course. Mr Eric Hayward, an Aboriginal liaison officer, visited the Centre and suggested a community-based program similar to that outlined in a branch report entitled *Minority Groups and the "Foxfire" Experience*. Since then, the enthusiasm of the two teachers and the interest of the Aboriginal Education Branch have developed the project to the stage where the following report has been prepared.

For many children, belonging to a minority group with its varying degrees of alienation from mainstream society, presents an obstacle to success in the normal curriculum. With Aboriginal children in particular, it is known that excessive numbers of high school students are operating at basic levels and below. There are many factors that contribute to this situation. Yet there is one factor, possessing two facets, that probably overrides all others. This factor is aptly expressed in the following statement from the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1975:

The development and nurture of a positive self image is the single most important ingredient for significant learning to take place. When a child has a positive self concept, when he thinks well of himself, when he believes that he can succeed and achieve, when he perceives other people feeling that way about him, he will respond in a positive way with growth and increasing maturity.

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Many Aboriginal children who are receiving education within the normal curriculum are not allowed to develop their own identity; and there is a refusal by the wider society to accept Aboriginal children for what they are.

If we are to achieve greater success with the education of Aboriginal children, it is essential that we develop a school curriculum that will tap the unique qualities of the rich minority culture and reflect the Aboriginal children's experiences, interests and aspirations. A school program must reinforce the children's perceptions of themselves and promote an understanding of their relationship to their environment, family and community. They must feel confident of their value within their own community, and appreciate that community's contribution to the welfare and progress of the wider Australian society.

In a school serving an exclusively Aboriginal population, it may be relatively easy to tailor a curriculum to meet the needs of Aboriginal children. In such a situation, considerable demands may be placed upon a non-Aboriginal teacher; but parents and teachers can be encouraged to help construct a relevant curriculum. In a school that serves an Aboriginal group within a wider community, it becomes more difficult to implement a valid program and the needs of the minority group are often neglected. The Woollah* community-based program, implemented at Kewdale Senior High School during 1977, is an attempt to overcome these difficulties. The keystone of the Woollah program is the production of a community-based magazine.

Aboriginal children in traditional communities before contact with Europeans, probably had very few identity problems. Things were as they were because they had been that way for ages past; and if Aboriginal children followed the ways of the tribe, they would fit into an ordered scheme of life, just as their forebears had done. How unsettled has this situation become? Change is now the constant factor; and the one certainty we have is that the children will be facing a world different from that of their ancestors. Their past may not equip them to face and cope with the new world; and many of the people and educational materials around them will challenge their family and cultural foundations. The Aborigines may not wish to return to the old way of life; but, if they are to cope with life to any degree, it is essential that they first understand and feel at home with their own identity.

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**Woollah* in the Nyoongar dialect is an exclamation of appreciation meaning 'Hooray - well done'.

An overwhelming majority of the educational materials which are produced are alien to the Aboriginal and present a physical and emotional picture that is strange. There is a need for material with which the Aboriginal children can identify, and through which they may begin to understand themselves and their relationship to their immediate environment. The Woollah Program is an attempt to produce such material.

Recent years have seen the passing of a number of grannies from within the ranks of the Nyoongar people. Older men and women still remain who can speak the Nyoongar dialect fluently and can remember tribal stories, songs and corroborees; but, on the whole, these people are well into their seventies. Another decade or so will see the loss, without record, of much that could still be saved for posterity. Collecting and publishing this material is a means that Kewdale is using to promote an Aboriginal interest in achieving improved communications and literacy skills. It is hoped that in the process the students will gain an understanding of, and appreciation for, their own historical and cultural roots.

A large amount of the publicity given to the Aboriginal community is negative in nature. It is the drunken fight, the quick spending of lottery winnings, and the difficulty some families experience in coping with State Housing Commission housing that most consistently make newspaper headlines. In researching and publicizing the more positive aspects of Aboriginal achievement, and in bringing to notice the work and accomplishments of Aboriginal leaders, the community-based magazine seeks to reinforce the positive self-concept of Aboriginal students.

Two issues of the magazine have been produced to date, with articles featuring prominent Aborigines, family histories, research into health and housing, and articles of topical interest. The students have been involved in the contemporary Aboriginal scene and the majority of their articles reflect current activities. In the production of these early magazines, members of the group have gained elementary skills in photography, recording, transcribing, article-writing, layout, circulation, correspondence, printing costs and other money matters relevant to producing a magazine. These skills having been gained, it is intended to spread the net wider and collect stories and articles that will reflect an Aboriginal view of the policies and events that have led to the current Aboriginal situation - to record traditional and contemporary art, craft, music and literature and to register an appreciation of the hardiness, ingenuity and philosophy that have enabled the older generation to survive.

It is involvement with the Aboriginal community that marks the Woollah-type magazine as different from the normal high school publication. Cultural heritage is seen as a motivational means of creating the need to record and communicate where the young people do not normally see the need to write. It is a tool to provide meaning and purpose to school programs that may lack relevance to the Aboriginal child.

In a growing number of high schools, concern is arising about the low achievement of Aboriginal students. The number of students successfully completing a worthwhile Achievement Certificate is very low.

The Kewdale experience has produced results which are encouraging. There has been an improved attitude amongst the Aboriginal students involved in the program. Prior to the program commencement, the Aboriginal students showed little sign of leadership qualities. They lacked motivation and had low achievement levels. The following comments were made by the two teachers involved in the project:

For the time they worked with us, we found changes in their attitude. It was evident they had a new attitude to themselves, a greater sense of their own being, a self-awareness. In talking to you now, they lift their heads and tell you about themselves and what they are doing, instead of standing with hands in pockets, head hung, and kicking their heels. They have drawn the favourable attention of the European students to themselves. Some have changed their attitude to work and carried this over into their other subjects. Some have made significant improvements in their literacy skills and presentation of their work. Some of them have learned enough social skills to be able to meet leaders in the community with confidence. Francine Kickett, having interviewed Senator Coleman about her work, now wishes to interview her on land rights for Aborigines. It was Francine's suggestion to send copies of our magazine to Mr Viner, M.H.R.

In going out and seeing Aborigines successful in work and Aborigines with their problems, we believe they now have a greater sense of identity and are beginning to find roots in their own people and a pride in being part of the Australian Aboriginal community.

The editor of the magazine, Francine Kickett, originally interviewed Mrs Elizabeth Isaacs at the Aboriginal Advancement Council soup kitchen. The confidence she gained through this experience enabled her to conduct an 'off-the-cuff' interview with Senator Ruth Coleman, whom she met at a 'contact' luncheon. From the published articles, it would appear that skills and interests gained through research within the Aboriginal community will enable the students to approach study of the wider community with greater understanding and sensitivity.

During the operation of the scheme, two opportunities occurred to encourage positive interaction between the Aboriginal students and the wider school population. One was when the Woollah group prepared a parents' night display in the school library. Illustrations, photographs and slides were shown in conjunction with cassette tapes and student explanation. The other opportunity came when the group presented copies of their first magazine to representatives of the school, the Regional Education Office and the Aboriginal Education Branch. An Aboriginal student, Cissie Nugget, delivered a confident speech in front of the school assembly. It is too early yet to judge, but it is felt that these types of activity will benefit the attitudes of both community groups.

As the Kewdale project continued to operate successfully, the Aboriginal Education Branch saw merit in offering advice on the program to other schools who had expressed concern about the low achievement of their Aboriginal pupils.

In mid-1977 the Aboriginal Education Branch was requested by Gnowangerup District High School to spend some time at the school, with the hope of providing solutions to the problems Aboriginal students were experiencing. The idea of a community-based project was introduced to the school and the Aboriginal community. The Principal decided to implement a Woollah-type program during the latter half of 1977.

The Woollah-type program has operated at Gnowangerup for too short a time to draw firm conclusions, but some of the trends have been most promising. As with Kewdale, the level of attendance of Aboriginal children has lifted and attitudes and behaviour have improved. In order to meet a deadline, the end of term holidays, most of the students came back to school in the afternoon and evenings. One particular young man had left school prior to the

program's commencement. He heard about the project and decided to return to school to involve himself in the work. He informed the teacher that he was not really a student, yet he managed to work consistently on the magazine. A smaller boy with truancy problems attended the night sessions in order to contribute to the magazine.

Gnowangerup's first magazine has been printed and was expected to be collated and distributed early in the last term of 1977. We will watch with interest the effect it has on the students and community.

There are one or two members of Nyoongar people living on the reserve at Gnowangerup who speak both the dialect and English fluently. One in particular, Mr Fred Roberts, has taken part in local corroborees, speaks Nyoongar fluently and has a wide knowledge of the folklore and myths attached to the local countryside. We are hoping that his knowledge will be recorded before it is too late.

It is planned that there should be an interchange, in the future, between students from Kewdale and Gnowangerup. Exchange of information and magazines between the various Aboriginal groups within Western Australia should lead to a wider understanding and awareness of the Aboriginal situation by Aboriginal students. The published material will, in addition, provide an avenue of understanding through which all Australians, regardless of their racial origin, may have an opportunity to learn about the history, culture and customs of this country's original inhabitants.

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